

Virginia Habitat Partners Corporate Certification Program Guidelines

1.0 Introduction

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' (VDGIF) mission is 1) to manage Virginia's wildlife and inland fish to maintain optimum populations of all species to serve the needs of the Commonwealth; 2) to provide opportunity for all to enjoy wildlife, inland fish, boating and related outdoor recreation; and 3) to promote safety for persons and property in connection with boating, hunting and fishing. In keeping with this mission, DGIF encourages habitat improvement projects throughout the Commonwealth including corporate projects.

Many Virginia industries and private landowners are committed to promoting a healthy environment, which includes the protection, restoration and improvement of wildlife habitat. This desire goes beyond compliance with regulations. Many companies in Virginia own large tracts of land where there are opportunities to better manage those areas for the benefit of wildlife.

The purpose of the Virginia Habitat Partners Corporate Certification Program is to encourage habitat improvement projects on corporate lands that make a substantial contribution to the welfare of wildlife communities. The Program is designed to promote sound stewardship of our natural resources and the lands and habitats on which wildlife are dependent. In addition, projects that participate in the Program will be registered as WildlifeMapping monitoring sites in order to facilitate data collection that will become part of VDGIF's Fish and Wildlife Information System.

The goals of the program are to:

- Promote species diversity and enhancement of game and non-game wildlife populations;
- Encourage companies to establish or improve wildlife conservation practices on corporate lands;
- Provide guidelines for the development and implementation of wildlife habitat plans;
- Provide a framework for recognition of these corporate conservation projects; and
- Provide a focal point for wildlife education opportunities among a company's employees and the citizens of the local community.

2.0 Qualifying Projects

This Program is targeted at new corporate habitat improvement projects of 40 contiguous acres or greater, or new projects that will impact a substantial cumulative acreage, such that a significant benefit to wildlife is realized. In addition, the project tract(s) must be in compliance with all state and federal environmental laws.

3.0 Existing Habitat Assessment

Prior to implementing a habitat project, a company shall perform an inventory of existing habitats. This may be accomplished by using a company's in house scientists, if available, or by hiring a consulting biologist, environmental consultant or other professional wildlife consultants. Members of a local college or university may make excellent candidates provided they have practical experience with wildlife habitat projects.

The habitat inventory is accomplished through a review of available information, including but not limited to topographic maps, aerial photos, soil surveys, and similar documents. From this information an on the ground survey will be conducted to compile a detailed map of available habitats.

4.0 Wildlife Species Inventory and Review

Concurrent with map preparation, a wildlife species review shall be performed by the company or their designee. This review will form a baseline list of the plants and animals available on a project site. Inventories will be completed utilizing accepted scientific protocols. VDGIF will then review the habitat assessment and the wildlife species inventory to make a determination. If the review and inventory are satisfactory, the project can be registered as a WildlifeMapping monitoring site. WildlifeMapping training sessions could be held at the facility for corporate personnel under the direction of a trained WildlifeMapping facilitator.

5.0 Proposed Wildlife Plan

The company will review the inventory data, identify areas where habitat can be improved, select a project(s), and develop a habitat improvement plan. This plan will:

1. make a substantial contribution to the enhancement or restoration of the wildlife communities on that tract;
2. have the potential to increase wildlife species diversity on the tract; and
3. preserve or enhance rare communities or habitats for rare species, if present.

VDGIF will give special consideration to plans that improve or enhance habitats for species of special concern or threatened or endangered species, as well as to plans that address the restoration of or improvements to wetlands, riparian corridors, early succession areas, and fish passageways. In addition, plans that include an educational component or public access to the project site for educational purposes will be ranked higher.

Community outreach is strongly encouraged in plan development. Involving conservation groups, community groups, hunting and fishing groups and other conservation-minded organizations would lend additional credibility to the project and help to assure a quality end product. Although not essential to ultimate certification, an outreach component will augment a project's community recognition and value.

6.0 Submission of Project Report and Review by VDGIF

The company will submit a project report containing the proposed wildlife habitat plan to VDGIF for review. The report will include:

- goals for the project;
- a species inventory of plants and animals already on site;
- a property map showing the existing habitat types (i.e. ponds, streams, riparian zones, uplands, wetlands, hardwoods, softwoods, meadows, etc.) and the areas available for habitat enhancement;
- the proposed wildlife habitat plan including discussion of its implementation, educational benefits, monitoring and maintenance; and
- a summary of community partners and planned outreach, if applicable.

VDGIF will review the project report. This review will include a site visit to talk with the project team leader and walk the area of the proposed project, during which time suggestions and comments will also be given. If the plan appears to serve the needs of this Program and requires no changes, VDGIF will follow-up the visit with an acknowledgement that the project has been approved for implementation. If the proposed wildlife habitat plan falls short of the goals of this Program, VDGIF will inform the applicant in writing and request changes.

7.0 Implementation and Monitoring

Following approval of the plan, the company's project team will implement the selected project(s).

Monitoring the success of the project(s) is critical to documenting long term improvements to wildlife populations and achieving the Program's goals. Monitoring shall include photographs of the project over time, periodic updates to species inventories, a regular review of the types and numbers of wildlife using a project, and other information outlined in the initial plan.

Prior to implementation of a project, photo reference stations shall be established to provide baseline views of the project site. Once the project is implemented, and after a minimum of one year establishment and monitoring, additional photos shall be taken to document changes in the project. Subsequent photos from these reference stations as well as from additional stations if desired will be included in future recertification requests.

Monitoring will also entail gathering additional species information to track the types and numbers of species using a particular project. Species observations that list the types of plants and animals using a project site will be maintained in a project note book or other means. As new species are observed, they can be added to the list. Reporting through the WildlifeMapping protocols will also document species changes.

Monitoring of species types shall continue throughout the life of a project. If a project

includes bird nest boxes, the boxes will be monitored periodically to survey the species and numbers of birds using the structures. These data would also be reported through the WildlifeMapping program. The company may elect to control nuisance species if necessary, and VDGIF will advise as appropriate.

8.0 Submittal of Monitoring Information and Progress Report

After one year of project implementation and monitoring, the company will submit an application for certification and a report summarizing project results to VDGIF for review. The report shall include:

- a current map and plan view of the site that shows the location of the implemented project(s);
- a written summary of the habitat development progress that has occurred to date;
- before and after wildlife species inventory;
- before and after reference photographs with a location map showing the view direction; and
- an update of the short and long-term goals of the project.

9.0 Habitat Certification and Public Relations

VDGIF will review the application for certification and the monitoring and progress reports. This review will consider the success of project implementation, the success of efforts to promote a diverse plant and animal community, and the degree to which the company has used the habitat area in its educational efforts.

If VDGIF deems the project to have met the goals of the Program, a Virginia Habitat Partners Corporate Certification Certificate will be awarded. Initial certification will be conferred for a three-year period. If the company desires signage, VDGIF will provide a habitat certification logo and designate a signage vendor that the company may use to produce the sign. VDGIF may assist the company with publicity about the certification through available means, such as Virginia Wildlife magazine, press releases, or other methods.

10.0 Certification Renewal

The company may elect to reapply in five years for recertification of the habitat project. The recertification process will include submission of an updated wildlife habitat plan that contains all of the same components as outlined for the initial submission (see above). VDGIF will then review the recertification request. If VDGIF determines that the project has maintained the standards of the Program and has continued to benefit the wildlife community, a new certificate will be awarded.